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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a statistical study of two community school districts within one urban school system. The purposes of the study were to determine (1) whether parents in a decentralized district are more satisfied with their schools than are parents in a regular, centralized district, and (2) whether the type of school district is a more significant indicator of a parent's satisfaction with the schools than the parent's race or age. Appended are tables illustrating study results, a sample questionnaire, and a bibliography. (LLR)

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THE SATISFACTION OF PARENTS WITH THEIR COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AS A MEASURE OF EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DECENTRALIZATION OF A SCHOOL SYSTEM

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The report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968) claims that urban schools are unresponsive and lack accountability to the communities they serve. The accusation of unresponsiveness is seldom heard in the relatively small suburban school systems, but frequently in the large city school systems. Racial and socio-economic strife in the city compound the discord between the schools and the communities they were meant to serve. The schools must endeavor to determine the priorities parents hold for the education of their children and therefrom formulate relevant programs and institutional structures. Consummately, it stands to reason that the success of public education would be enhanced if the interaction between the schools and their publics would be solidified--if the participation of parents in the educational decision-making process of their schools were tenable. The structural decentralization of a school system is presumed to catalyze such participation.

Trends in school system decentralization are embedded in our democratic heritage. The framers of the Constitution sought to limit the authority of central government and preserve the strength of each state as an affirmation of their belief in regional democratic self-determination. Participatory government was availed close to the local origins of problems as the community town-hall meeting became the vestibule of the democratic way of life. Since then, one of the traditional goals of public education in the United States has always been to prepare pupils for participation in a democratic society (Lopate et al., 1969). Town-hall government may be rare today; however, national rhetoric suggests a belief in continuing delegation of authority to local communities: "I am determined to see to it that the flow of power in education goes toward, and not away from the local community. The diversity and freedom of education in this nation, founded on local administration and State responsibility, must prevail." (Nixon, 1970, p. 4).

However, for a multitude of reasons, the local schools are not as responsive as they could be to the publics they serve. Germane is the challenge by many black Americans that the public education of their children is inadequate.

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In response, comments such as the following by Norman Johnson of the University of Pittsburg (Changing Times, 1969, p. 46), have become common for black parents in their quest for control of the schools their children attend, in order to alleviate the unresponsiveness of the schools:

> We feel our responsibility now is to our community alone... We have determined that we will take over the direction and control of our children's schools. We may make some mistakes. However, these mistakes can hardly be more serious than the ones being made at present...because we, holding the welfare of the children as our only criterion, will effect change as soon as we...deem it to be necessary. When people have an opportunity to be really involved,...when they know that they can be part of making decisions, we will not have to worry about parental apathy or student disinterest.

Decentralization has as its base an attempt to reconnect the schools with the local communities they originally were to serve--to re-establish the school as a servant of the people. The structural means of achieving decentralization is to dismantle a school bureaucracy by simplifying the channels of communication and increasing the delegation of authority to the staff and the lay public.

In the path of decentralization lie burdensome obstacles, which may be grouped into three categories--teachers, politics, and finances. Teachers are insecure where their tenure, transfer, and bargaining power within a decentralized school district are concerned. Opposition to decentralization will also precipitate on the local level when the boundaries of the new decentralized districts are drawn up, for how will they be gerrymandered--along geographic, socio-economic, political, ethnic, or racial lines? What effect would the selection of either or combination of these have on the education of the children? Furthermore, it is the minority neighborhood--which is exerting the most pressure to enfranchise itself as an autonomous district--which musters the lowest tax base and would therefore suffer the most if it were to become autonomous. Fortunately, compromises have been suggested and already implemented where partial decentralization has taken place, in overcoming these obstacles.

Various urban school districts throughout the nation have already committed themselves toward the decentralization of their bureaucracy. To accomplish this many funds and human efforts will be expanded. But yet no research exists to measure the effects of such a decentralization. Thus, it was the purpose of this research study to seek answers to these questions: (1) Are parents of a decentralized community school district more satisfied with their schools than parents of a regular centralized district? (2) Is the type of school district a more significant indicator of a parent's satisfaction with the schools than the parent's race or age?

The second question became particularly important since decentralization is not the only variable with a high probability of affecting attitudes toward the schools. For example, race was found to be a variable greatly affecting the priorities of parents for the goals of the schools (Downey, Seager, and Slagle, 1958; Caplan and Paige, 1968). As different race subpublics have been found to hold different views about education so have different age subpublics (Downey, Seager, and Slagle, 1958; Jennings, 1967; Gallup Poll, 1969). The prevalent negative attitudes toward institutionalized education by the black and young subpublics were expected to be negated in a comparison between parents of a decentralized and centralized district.

Stipulative Definitions

The first two terms are based on the operating New York City decentralization prototype (1969) and are not violated by the school system studied in this research.

CENTRALIZED SCHOOL DISTRICT: a feeder system of secondary and elementary schools, wherein each school is directly responsible for its actions and programs to the central administration and board of directors of the city school system. Each school may have its own PTA, but without the authority to share in the decision-making process effecting that school's operation.

DECENTRALIZED SCHOOL DISTRICT: a community district comprising the pupil attendance boundaries of a senior high school and its feeder schools, directed by its own superintendent and board of community residents. The decentralized district has been delegated by the city or super-district administration the authority to (1) establish the objectives of the comprehensive K-12 program, (2) recommend staff, faculty, and administrators for employment and transfer, and (3) determine the priorities for expending the allocated funds.

SATISFACTION: the contentment of parents with their schools. It is the degree of congruence between a parent's expectations for the schools and his perception of the schools' attainment of those expectations (Getzels, Lipham and Campbell, 1968).

PARENT: the (one) legally registered guardian of the pupil.

Review of Related Research

An array of studies uncovered some of the variables which affect an individual's satisfaction directly. Coch and French (1948) found that new group goals (e.g., curriculum and methodology changes in community schools) are more readily accepted by members (e.g., parents) when the members participate in establishing the goals than when they are imposed. Various studies found that the participation of a member in a group increases proportionately as the size of the group decreases (Tallachi, 1960; Lopate et al., 1970). The productivity and efficiency of an individual (e.g., parent participating in the decision-making process of the schools) was also found to increase as the size of the work group decreased (Marriot, 1949). Vroom (1960) came closest with his research finding to the core of this decentralization study: the degree of felt participation of an individual in the decision-making process correlated very highly with the individual's attitude toward his job. Unfortunately all of the preceding studies had been conducted in an industrial environment. One significant and related study which had been conducted in an education environment (Lehrmann, 1956) found that teachers and community members both acknowledged greater satisfaction with the schools as a result of joint educational planning.

The satisfaction of parents with their schools can also be measured and observed in terms of their perceptions of their children's successes in school. Mort and Cornell (1941) calculated that the educational qualities of school districts were measurable by their adaptability to social change, which correlated with their financial policies, district size, and degree of lay and professional participation. The participation by parents in various facets of the school's operation was found to improve the parents' attitudes toward the schools in a host of studies (Cloward and Jones, 1963; Hess and Shipman, 1966; Rankin, 1967; Roesell, 1968). Other studies (Schiff, 1963; Brookover, 1965; McCarthy, 1969) reported that various academic achievements were raised for those students whose parents participated in school planning, or in school visitation (Jablonsky, 1968). From a different angle, Zigler (1966) interpolated from his studies that cognitive development cannot produce the desired achievement in a pupil without parallel if not prerequisite changes in his affective domain--the student's commitment, which heavily hinges on the parent's

commitment toward the schools. Coleman (1966) likewise stressed this saliency: It was found that students performed better in school if they held a sense of power over their destinies and a sense of dignity or self worth, which were also found to depend on the self-determinations of the respective families. Therein lies appropriate support for the theory of black control over black schools, which would be facilitated through decentralization.

Procedure of the Study

Two community school districts were selected from within one large city school system. Each district was divided into a high and a low socio-economic zone to minimize the effect of social and economic status on the dependent variable--parental satisfaction. U. S. Government census tracts (1962) and a separate socio-economic index (1965) were employed to achieve the stratification. A stratified random sample of 1000 parents were selected from the two districts--one centralized and the other decentralized. This represented approximately a 15 per cent sample of all parents in the two districts.

The sample of 1000 parents was interviewed by 13 college students who had received training and practice in interviewing. The interview instrument was a closed ended questionnaire consisting of 12 Guttman type items phrased in the vernacular. While the interviewer read the questions the subject was given a card to hold which listed his response alternatives to each question--NOT AT ALL, SOMEWHAT, MUCH, and VERY MUCH. The interviewer in turn recorded the responses in coded form, 1, 2, 3, and 4, respectively.

The probability of the instrument gathering reliable data was estimated through a test-retest procedure of 17 subjects over a span of one week. This yielded a Pearson $r=.895$, which was significant at the .001 level. The probability of the instrument gathering valid data was established through content validity.

From alternative statistical procedures the correlation coefficient (point biserial, biserial, and eta) was considered to be the most appropriate for treatment of the data. Although such a design limits the conclusions to be drawn from this study, the decision was made that any design which would allow the researcher to make cause and effect inferences would have been inappropriate due to lack of true matching.

The significances of the correlation coefficients were compared after the correlations had been converted to Fisher's z's. All findings in this study are reported at the closest level of probability, rather than as the acceptance or rejection of a null hypothesis at one of the traditional levels of significance.

Results of the Study

Of the 1000 parents in the sample 738 were reached by the interviewers, of which 657 or 89.0 per cent responded and full adhered to the questionnaire. Responses were not higher in any one socio-economic zone or district. Also, on the basis of a chi square test for the distribution of the interviewers, it is valid to conclude that the male and female interviewers were randomly distributed and any affect their sex may have had was thereby also randomly distributed across the four socio-economic zones. On the basis of a Spearman Rank-Order Correlation, which yielded a $rho=.537$ ($p < .10$), it is furthermore valid to conclude that the interviewers who surveyed two tracts each did not significantly affect their subjects.

The presentation of the data (see Appendix) revealed that the correlations between satisfaction and district type, race, and dichotomous age were unimodal, symmetric, and continuous and therein satisfied the conditions for the point-biserial and biserial r's, rather than a Pearson r. The bivariate relationship

between satisfaction and continuous age was homoscedastic and curvilinear, justifying the use of the eta coefficient.

An analysis of the data revealed (1) the relationship between satisfaction and district type yielded an r_{pb}=.239, significant beyond the .001 level; (2) the relationship between satisfaction and race yielded an r_{pb}=.119, significant at the .01 level; (3) the relationship between satisfaction and dichotomous age (30 and below vs. above 30) yielded an r_b=-.013, the probability of relationship for which was less than .75. And the relationship between satisfaction and continuous age yielded an eta=.155, the probability of relationship for which was less than .90.

Within one large city school system, parents residing in a decentralized community school district were found to be significantly more satisfied with their community schools than parents residing in a centralized school district. The highly significant correlation between district type and satisfaction has strengthened the credibility of the primary hypothesis, which has thus survived a chance for disconfirmation. In an attempt to compare the relative power of variables district type, race, and age as indicators of parental satisfaction, the respective correlation coefficients were converted to Fisher's z coefficients. Therefrom it was concluded that the type of school district was a more significant indicator of a parent's satisfaction with the community schools than the parent's age or race.

However, when age was dichotomized at 24 instead of at 30, the correlation between age and satisfaction resulted in an r_b=.113, which was significant at the .25 level. Specifically for Negroes, when age was dichotomized at 24, the correlation between age and satisfaction yielded an r_b=.152, which was significant at the .10 level. Apparently the theory that the young generations are less satisfield with the schools than the older generations finds support in this study, especially for the Negro subpublic, when age was dichotomized at 24. It could not, however, be generalized from this study that Negroes increased their satisfaction with the public schools due to decentralization more than did Caucasians.

Alsc, an investigation of the relationship between socio-economic zones and the satisfaction scores of the subjects yielded an r_{pb}=.026, which led to the conclusion that the probability of a relationship existing between socio-economic status and satisfaction was less than .75.

Finally, the composite mean satisfaction of all parents in the sample with their public schools was 30.93, which is a rating somewhere between "much" and "somewhat" satisfied.

Recommendations and Concerns

It should be realized that the concept of decentralization may perhaps be a great means to achieve desirable ends--improving public education and serving the local community--but it is not an end in itself. Decentralization is given a fair chance only if the parents can exercise the controversial power to affect the global goals and objectives of the schools. To tease the parents with this power without granting it may evoke greater wrath upon the schools than in a centralized district where parents know that their opinions will not serve as inputs to the schools.

This has been a correlational study. In order to infer that decentralization causes high parental satisfaction, a pre test-post test design is needed. It could span perhaps four years, to be administered prior to the planned initation of decentralization and two years after full implementation of the decentralization. A high mobility rate among city dwellers may, however, impair the feasibility of such a longitudinal study.

Appendixes

DICHOTOMOUS SUBPUBLICS, MEANS, S'S, AND N'S GROUPED

Category	Mean score: satisfaction	Standard deviation	Sample size	Per cent of total
Dichotomous variable is district:				
decentralized	32.26	5.15	330	50.2
centralized	29.59	5.72	327	49.8
both	30.93	5.60	657	100.0
Dichotomous variable is race:				
Negro	31.61	5.84	316	48.2
Caucasian and other	30.28	5.31	339	51.8
both	30.92	5.61	655	100.00
Dichotomous variable is age:				
age 30 and below	30.86	4.71	119	18.1
above age 30	30.95	5.78	538	81.9
both	30.93	5.60	657	100.0

CONTINUOUS AGE (GROUPED), MEANS, S'S, AND N'S

Age span	Sample size	Mean score: satisfaction	Standard deviation
22-24	11	27.82	4.24
25-27	41	31.93	4.63
28-30	67	30.70	4.65
31-33	89	30.61	5.46
34-36	80	31.61	5.35
37-39	95	30.37	5.86
40-42	107	31.13	6.29
43-45	54	31.20	6.09
46-48	39	29.85	5.37
49-51	39	31.72	5.74
52-54	19	31.68	5.95
55-57	4	28.00	2.16
58-60	7	28.86	4.71
61-63	3	35.67	6.66
64-66	2	35.50	10.61
Sample: 22-66	657	30.93	5.60

Analysis of Variance of Above Data:

Category	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square	F value
between groups	489.9730	14	34.9981	1.1191
within groups	20076.8063	642	31.2723	
total	20566.7793	656		

Appendix

ASSESSING PARENTAL SATISFACTION WITH THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Interviewer's Opening Statement: "Hi, Mr(s). _____. I'm from the University of Washington. We're doing a short survey on your community schools--only 12 questions. Would you please answer each question with either NOT AT ALL, SOMEWHAT, MUCH or VERY MUCH. Thank you."

Directions: Hand the respondent the card which lists the four alternatives, to look at while you ask him the questions below. You record the code number for each response in the right hand margin: not at all = 1, somewhat = 2, much = 3, very much = 4.

1. How much do your children like going to school? ____

2. How satisfied are you with your schools? ____

3. How informed are you about what your schools are doing? ____

4. How much, do you think, are your schools preparing your children for their future? ____

5. How hard, do you think, do your schools try to make changes which the community recommends? ____

6. How much do you expect your schools to improve in the next few years? ____

7. How well do you know the principals and teachers of your children? ____

8. How satisfied are you with the way your schools are using your tax dollars? ____

9. How much say, do you think, <u>should</u> you have in general school matters? ____

10. How much say, do you think, the schools <u>want</u> you to have in general school matters? ____

11. How much of a <u>chance</u> do parents have to participate in making school decisions? ____

12. How much <u>do</u> parents actually participate in making school decisions? ____

Data on the Respondent: Birthyear_____ Race N C o (circle)

District type da db ca cb (circle) Interviewer _____

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